

Swacch Social Media: Cleaning Up Online Spaces During India's General Elections

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Summary

Political parties need to step up and join hands with other stakeholders to clean up social media spaces during the Indian general elections.

Introduction

Facebook's announcement on 1 April 2019 that it had removed around 700 pages and accounts linked to India's two main political parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" is one of several initiatives by technology companies to clean up social media spaces during the general elections.

Unsurprisingly, both parties used this announcement for greater political mileage. Instead, what parties should really be doing is discussing how to reign in malicious online content and behaviour. With the battle for hearts and minds being played out on the social media battlefield, fighting misinformation, fake news, propaganda and hate speech is crucial to upholding election integrity—thereby safeguarding India's democracy.

As vast amounts of resources—financial, technological and human—are being pumped in to identify, remove, and counter misinformation and fake news on a daily basis, it behoves all political actors, *including* political parties, to tackle this threat on a war footing.

The Model Code in Cyberspace

The model code of conduct puts a moral obligation on all relevant political actors and the state machinery to ensure elections are free and fair, and that political discourse is of high quality. Violation of the model code can incur fines, a first information report (FIR) filed with the police, or criminal and legal action. However, it is often the censure and negative publicity attached to such unethical behaviour, rather than the penalties *per se*, that have acted as deterrents.

Recent initiatives by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and social media companies have extended the model code to social media. Facebook's latest action is part of its efforts to adhere to the voluntary code of ethics for the general elections.

Enforcing the model code in cyberspace was never going to be an easy task, given the complexities involved in such a massive exercise. While making a commendable—albeit last-minute—effort to tackle immediate problems, the ECI has been on the back foot due to the fast-changing media landscape.

A case in point is the controversy surrounding the NaMo TV channel, which was quietly launched in late March 2019, and began broadcasting election rallies and speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (NaMo as he is popularly known) and other pro-BJP content from the internet via Direct-to-Home (DTH) and cable TV.

Following complaints by opposition parties that the channel's launch was a violation of the model code, the ECI, on 11 April 2019, barred the channel from airing any political content that had not been certified. By this time, according to some reports, the channel had achieved a reach of 37 per cent in just two days, no doubt aided by its promotion on social media by the BJP and related accounts.

The case reflects the grey areas, complexities, and opportunities of the dynamic new media landscape for political actors.

Collaborative Actions

The biggest challenge at this stage is tackling fake news and other malicious content, with quick and deterrent actions required for upholding free and fair elections. However, in the absence of more robust systems, current arrangements are akin to an endless game of whack-a-mole, with disruptive forces always one step ahead.

The need of the hour is for all concerned stakeholders to join hands in a united effort to clean up social media spaces to strengthen India's democratic fabric. While policy and legislative changes are steps in the right direction, we also need sustainable, long-term solutions that build up social resilience and citizen immunity to fake news and misinformation online.

Political parties have an important role to play in this process. If they are to be seen as addressing and not contributing to the problem, political parties will have to step up to the plate and begin addressing this issue.

This must be done both in-house as well as through alliances—with fact-checkers, the ECI, official channels and media organisations, interested citizens and civil society organisations, and technology companies. This must include both immediate and pre-emptive measures, such as critical digital literacy and information dissemination efforts, within a citizen-centric framework.

Such a collaborative effort has several advantages, including pooling resources and efforts towards a common cause. Crucially, it also reduces the dangers inherent in asking technology companies to police online content. While the effects on free speech and expression is one problematic aspect, another area of concern is the lack of transparency and accountability in the functioning of technology companies as they attempt to clean up social media spaces. This has already manifested in claims by individuals and pages that Facebook took down their accounts with no prior warning or explanation.

Conclusion

Understandably, the election authorities, technology companies, and civil society are working in a crunch situation, and ongoing efforts offer temporary respite during the world's largest democratic exercise. There is no doubt that social media is going to play a significant role during the elections, and there is no time to wait for policy changes to catch up. What is needed now is for political parties to work with their supporters and other stakeholders to stem fake news, particularly dangerous and divisive content. They should take heed of the lessons of the US and Brazilian elections, and tackle online threats before they pose serious and irreversible harm to India's democratic processes and its social fabric.

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